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Highlights on Major Agricultural Policy Issues

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Overview

Agriculture has long been tied closely to government policy, virtually dating from the agrarian principles that were fundamental in the founding of our republic. The Rectangular Land Survey Act, the Homestead Act, and the Smith-Lever Act were early examples of federal involvement. Most agricultural policy analysts, however, date the era of federal government intervention in the agricultural economy from the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, which ushered in farm price and income supports, production controls and conservation programs that continue to the present, albeit substantially and frequently modified.

A wide range of policy issues is now frequently associated with agriculture. These span from the traditional farm commodity (price and income support) programs to food policy (food stamps, food safety and wholesomeness, diet and health, etc.), rural development, energy policy (e. g. ethanol), natural resources, macroeconomic and trade policies and the like. Indeed, in today's industrialized, highly specialized and interdependent economy where the majority of people living on farms work full time at something other than farming, some association can be drawn between the agricultural sector and nearly every public policy issue. Thus, any list of current policy issues important to the sector is sure to miss ones that are considered important, even crucial, by some individuals and/or groups.

Nonetheless, I herewithin set forth six issues for briefs: (1) international trade and related macroeconomic policies, (2) farm commodity (price and income support) policy, (3) federal farm credit policies, (4) ground water quality, (5) "family" farms, and (6) new agricultural products/new uses for agricultural products. Recognize that these issues are not mutually exclusive, nor is the list comprehensive. It is based on my judgement of issues that have generated widespread interest (which usually means that there are strongly-held and often conflicting beliefs) or that have merit in principle and thus are likely to surface for vigorous discussion. Volumes exist in the literature regarding each of these issues (and many others). Herebelow I touch on the dimensions most critical to a general grasp of the issue—many nuances and twists exist that simply cannot be covered in a brief, yet one should expect them to surface in the course of discussion.

1. International Trade and Macroeconomic Policy

The American farm economy became export dependent in the early 1970s, and with the downturn in both agricultural exports and the general farm economy in the early 1980s, international trade and related macroeconomic policies became

of direct and intense interest to the sector. On a real (deflated) value basis, agricultural exports more than doubled between 1972 and 1974, and grew at a compound average annual rate exceeding 8 percent from 1974 through 1981. However, beginning in 1982 exports declined, falling at a compound average annual rate exceeding 9 percent through 1986, bringing the real value to less than one-half of its peak of $43.8 billion in 1981 (1981 $s). Export volume has increased in 1987 but value has continued to decline due primarily to lower grain prices. At their peak, the value of agricultural exports equaled 30 percent of cash farm receipts, up from 15 percent in 1972. By 1986 they had declined to less than 20 percent. Thus, there is a clear, although imperfect, relationship between changes in exports and farm income.

Not all of agriculture is equally affected by exports. On a volume basis, about 85 percent of all export shipments are basic agricultural commodities: feed grains, food grains, and oilseeds (or in the vernacular of Ohio agriculture, corn, wheat and soybeans). Production of these can be referred to as part of the cash grains sector, which also includes industries supplying crop production inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides and processing and handling industries such as grain millers and elevators. The cash grains sector is most directly affected by changes in exports, that is, incomes and asset values improve as exports increase and vice versa whereas the livestock sector tends to be less directly and more inversely affected, primarily due to the impacts of grain exports on feed costs and availabilities. Thus, the downturn in agricultural exports has been of much greater concern to the cash grain sector. This is particularly important in Ohio because the export "boom" of the 1970s lifted the price surface for cash grains in the eastern corn belt (e. g. Ohio) relative to the western corn belt (e. g. Iowa) due to proximity to export ports, thus encouraging many grain-livestock producers to drop their livestock enterprises. As a result, the share of cash receipts to Ohio farmers earned from livestock fell from nearly 60 percent in 1970 to about 40 percent by 1980. By like token, the allied industries (suppliers, handlers, etc.) associated with grains expanded while those tied to livestock contracted. More recently, parts of animal agriculture are actually experiencing a bit of an economic renaissance, following the decline in grain and feed costs associated with the weaker export market and reduced competition for land and financial resources from crop producers.

The antecedents for the dramatic swing in exports are manifold, but tie closely to changes in macroeconomic policies. The most obvious and direct factor influencing exports is relative agricultural production trends in the U.S. and other nations. In the 1960s, for example, non-U.S. agricultural production grew at an average annual rate of 3.2 percent; the U.S. at 1.4 percent. During the 1970s, the non-U.S. rate fell to an average of 2.0 percent while the U.S. jumped to a 3.7 percent growth rate. Since 1981, the non-U.S. rate has rebounded to 3.2 percent; the U.S. has actually **reduced** output at an average annual rate of about 0.3 percent.

Changes in production trends have been strongly influenced by economics--economic incentives, if you will. Relative prices figure prominently among these incentives. Relative prices are affected by numerous factors, including farm price support policies of different countries, which is taken up in issue 2, below. One dominant factor is currency exchange rates. Devaluations in

the U.S. dollar in the early 1970s, followed by suspension of U.S. participation in the Bretton Woods agreement which effectively put the dollar on a floating basis vis-a-vis most other major currencies, resulted in appreciable declines in both the dollar value and the effective price of U.S. goods in world markets during that decade. The reverse occurred as a result of the strengthening dollar beginning in 1981. The impacts of macroeconomic policies, such as the switch in monetary policy from interest rate targeting to monetary growth targeting and deficit financing by the federal government, on dollar values and thus on the price competitiveness of U.S. agricultural products in international markets is well understood.

Another important economic policy-related factor is foreign credit. When the U.S. maintained an expansionary monetary policy during much of the 1970s, dollar-denominated loans were easily obtained and low cost to many foreign countries. As lower income countries borrowed money, they spent disproportionately heavy on food and farm commodities. When U.S. monetary policy tightened and loans became due, debtor countries were forced to not only curtail purchases but to produce more to sell on world markets in order to generate foreign exchange necessary to service external debt. Many countries had little to produce except agricultural goods.

For the sake of expediency I will save further examples. The point is that, today there are few people commercially associated with agriculture who do not understand that macroeconomic policies affect them in numerous ways, and who perceive that most of these effects in recent years have been deleterious. In general, many also perceive, rightly or wrongly, that policymakers are not very sensitive to such impacts.

International trade policies obviously also figure in to the export issue. Two major components important to agriculture are trade barriers and subsidies. While the general posture of the U.S. is, other countries should lower or eliminate barriers that they have erected to the importing of U.S. farm and food products (and many such barriers exist), one needs to recognize that the U.S. maintains some import barriers as well, such as quotas on dairy product imports, "voluntary" quotas on beef imports, countervailing duties on hog imports from Canada, grade and pack standards on fresh fruits and vegetables, and several others. These are strongly defended by the producer and industry groups in the U.S. who benefit from the protection. The subsidy issue is intermingled with domestic farm policies, therefore I deal with it under issue 2. There is also potential to develop a strong and innovative bilateral trade initiative for the agricultural sector regarding grains and ethanol. I expand somewhat on that possibility under issue 6.

2. Farm Income and Price Support Policy

By farm income and price support policy I mean to cover a whole range of federal commodity policies and programs, including price supports, income payments, production controls and conservation requirements. In brief, these programs have applied primarily to basic commodities plus soybeans, milk, tobacco, peanuts and cotton.

Marketing quotas have been used mainly for tobacco and peanuts, with quantities restricted to what is estimated will clear the market at the support price level, with the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) standing by to take any surplus supplies either as direct purchases or as collateral on non-recourse loans. The major feature of the milk program has been price support, operated through CCC purchases of manufactured dairy products at prices pegged to the support price for farm milk plus a "make allowance" to cover processing costs. More recently, milk production has become a direct policy variable through payments to farmers for reducing the number of cows milked.

Price support for basic commodities, soybeans and cotton has been provided mainly in the form of CCC non-recourse loans, with the loan rate as a proxy for the level of support. Except for soybeans, producers often have been required to divert some acreage from crop production to conserving or alternative uses or idle it in order to be eligible to receive price support loans. In some cases, direct (rental-type) payments have been made on some or all of the diverted acres. Periodically, and more so in recent years, direct payments have also been made to participating farmers when market prices have fallen below target prices (deficiency payments). Also, direct payments are made to farmers who have agreed to remove highly erodible land from crop production for 10 years (the Conservation Reserve Program; there was a somewhat similar program in the 1950s called the Soil Bank) and in some cases to farmers who have experienced crop losses due to natural disasters. Direct payments can be considered equivalent to producer subsidies.

A significant change was made in price support/deficiency payment program provisions as a result of the 1985 farm bill (Food Security Act of 1985). Price support levels (loan rates) for basic commodities were lowered significantly (approximately 30 percent for corn and wheat) while target prices were frozen at (relatively high) 1985 levels. The basic rationale was to lower market prices in order to encourage use, particularly export sales, while protecting farmers incomes with higher deficiency payments. The results have been sharply lower market prices and market receipts for farmers from the sale of these products while deficiency payments have more than doubled. At the same time, more rigorous guidelines were put into place to limit the size of total payments received by any given individual.

Criticism of current policy abounds. Both the low price support loan rates and high deficiency payments have come under attack, as have payment limits. The low loan rates and related decline in market prices have encouraged greater use, but total revenues have declined due to inelastic demand. The increased dependency of cash grain farmers on deficiency payments has caused increased participation in commodity programs and put the operators of large acreages at a disadvantage due to the payment limits. By in large, only buyers are satisfied. They are paying lower prices while the taxpayer, in essence, is reimbursing the producer through deficiency payments. Government outlays have increased dramatically, adding to federal budget problems. Operators of larger acreages, generally the more aggressive and efficient operators, have had to down-size and/or restructure in order to mitigate some of the discriminatory impacts of payment limits, while enough producers have been able to find ways of circumventing the rules to continue to obtain large

enough payments to attract the ire of critics. Foreign producers and governments that operate price support programs for their farmers find themselves facing low priced competition on world markets from subsidized U.S. producers, raising the specter of retaliation in terms of higher trade barriers against U.S. products and increased export subsidies on their own farm products.

Numerous proposals have been put forward in recent months to deal with various of the perceived short comings of the 1985 farm bill. At one extreme is the Harkin-Gephardt bill, which in essence proposes a system of mandatory acreage restrictions and substantially higher price supports, with export subsidies to dispose of any surplus production and elimination of target prices and deficiency payments. More modest proposals include the Boschwitz-Boren bill and the Reagan administration's "0-92" concept that would essentially decouple direct payments from current production levels. At the other extreme are proposals to phase-out government price and income supports.

These issues have also become a focal point in the current Uruguay round of GATT negotiations. The U.S. has proposed a multilateral elimination of all agricultural subsidies and trade restrictions by the year 2000. The proposal is aimed in particular at the European Community's (EC) Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Japan, both of which have highly restrictive import policies for many of the agricultural products exported by the U.S. and high price support systems for many of their domestic farm products. The EC also makes aggressive use of export subsidies to dispose of surplus farm production, particularly wheat and dairy products, that results from their high price supports. A basic premise of the U.S. is that the costs of these programs to the respective governments has become enough of a burden to encourage consideration of termination if other countries do likewise. The validity of that premise, however, is not clear at this point. Even in the U.S., with only about 3 percent of the population involved in farming, there is considerable resistance to the phase-out of agricultural programs. In the EC and Japan, with closer to 10 and 20 percent of their respective populations involved in farming, resistance is perhaps too mild of a term. Indeed, many experts on the EC contend that the CAP has been the most important glue in holding that community together since its formation.

The bottom line is, domestic agricultural policies and international agricultural trade negotiations are inexorably intertwined. However, until the Administration's current GATT proposal, they have been treated separately in the policy process. By like token, it would be wildly premature to presume that we are entering a period in which domestic agricultural policies will be forged in an international arena. The reality is, we have much greater international economic interdependence than we have international political institutions within which to formulate rules.

3. Federal Farm Credit Policies

The federal government has long been involved in providing credit to the agricultural sector. In addition to credit provided as an adjunct to price and income support policies by the CCC (see issue 2), the most significant credit policies and programs have been: (1) federal backing for the cooperative Farm Credit System (FCS), and (2) direct federal lending and loan

guarantees to "needy" farmers through the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Federal involvement in the Farm Credit System came in the form of initial capital, which was subsequently repaid by the farmer-owners of the system, and as a regulator and in providing "agency status" which has allowed the FCS to sell bonds at relatively favorable rates. In essence, agency status implies a federal government backing to FCS bonds. Regarding the FmHA, federal funds are used for operating expenses, to provide loan funds, and to guarantee repayment of qualifying private loans.

With the onset of severe financial stress for heavily indebted farmers in the early 1980s, these credit agencies began experiencing significant operating losses. Delinquent farm loans, a persistent problem for FmHA due to its posture as lender of last resort, nearly doubled in 1982 to $9.5 billion and by the end of 1986 topped $12 billion. Delinquent loans held by the FCS (and other farm lenders) began increasing at the same time, with FCS delinquencies totalling $7.1 billion at the end of 1986. (By comparison, delinquent farm loans held by commercial banks totaled $2.2 billion.) Obviously, delinquent and nonperforming loans impose additional costs on lenders. Including provisions for losses on outstanding loans, the FCS has registered operating losses totalling $4.6 billion over the past two years, with projections for another $1.3 billion or so in losses this year and more in 1988 and 1989. The FmHA has also experienced significant operating losses, but as a federal agency, these translate into the need for greater appropriations rather than "red ink" per se.

There are different policy issues regarding FCS and FmHA. The operating losses experienced by FCS, combined with its marginal cost pricing procedure for loans, resulted in noncompetitive interest rates on its loans and the loss of many of its best farmer borrowers to commercial banks. Losses also threatened buyer perceptions of the soundness of its bonds, raising the possibility of increased cost of funds which would have further eroded its competitive position in the farm credit market. However, the Farm Credit Act amendments of 1985 essentially guaranteed repayment of FCS bonds by the federal government, thus restoring its agency status regarding cost of funds.

The current issue is, to what extent and under what terms will the federal government provide funds to the system so that it can minimize the operating losses that must be priced into their current loans and preserve the value of its capital stock (which is owned by farmers who are member-borrowers). The early stance by both the Administration and Congress was that, any such federal assistance should be predicated on loss sharing among all of the component banks and associations of the FCS, as well as consolidation of individual associations into more centralized units. That proved to be immensely unpopular, particularly among the stronger associations whose reserves would have been shared with others. Several associations, including two Production Credit Associations and six Federal Land Bank Associations in Ohio, voted to remain outside the consolidation. This issue remains unresolved, although as time progresses and the magnitude of farm financial stress diminishes, it appears that the size of FCS losses which would need to be covered by government backing are also diminishing somewhat. The potential impairment of member stock is probably the most sensitive political dimension of this issue.

Regarding FmHA, current issues turn around how much federal funding should be provided. As the lender of last resort, the quality of FmHA's loan portfolio has never been particularly good; under conditions of financial stress it has become much worse. In 1980 for example, before the current round of financial problems in agriculture, delinquent loans accounted for more than 18 percent of the FmHA portfolio; by the end of 1984 this had risen to 45.9 percent and at the end of last year stood at 42.9 percent. Despite this, foreclosures and charge-offs of bad loans have come very slowly—between 1983 and 1986, less than $1 billion in FmHA loans were charged off, in comparison to about $3.2 billion in FCS charge-offs and $3.4 billion in agricultural loan charge-offs by commercial banks. It has simply been politically infeasible to foreclose on many of these delinquent and nonperforming loans, or to tighten appreciably the eligibility requirements for new or renewed loans. Thus, FmHA has dimensions of both a federal subsidy program for marginal farmers and a loan program for limited resource farmers. The basic unresolved policy question is, how much in the way of subsidies should be provided to relatively "high risk" farmers through essentially free or very low cost credit?

4. Groundwater Quality

This is not strictly an agricultural policy issue, but one that has important implications for the sector. Contamination of ground water as a policy issue is growing in intensity, particularly among people who reside in rural areas. Approximately 50 percent of the nation's population uses groundwater as their primary source of drinking water. In rural areas, more than 85 percent rely on groundwater. Contaminated groundwater is linked, through scientific evidence, to human and animal health. Nitrate accumulation in drinking water, for example, can cause methemoglobinemia, gastric cancer, nervous system impairment and birth defects. Methemoglobinemia is largely a problem with infants, sometimes resulting in "blue baby" syndrome; death from asphyxiation. Thus, there is a risk factor associated with drinking contaminated groundwater.

Groundwater, as contrasted with surface water, is the water that saturates the spaces between particles of soil and rock under the land surface. This water moves considerably slower than surface water. Contamination is the addition of elements, compounds or pathogens that alter the composition of water in the ground. Pollution occurs when contaminates concentrate in the water to the point where it is unfit for present and future uses. Groundwater pollution occurs under ground and out of sight which makes detection difficult and sources hard to find. Pollutants usually enter from the surface and percolate downward into the aquifer. Because of the slow movement of groundwater, long time lags frequently occur between contamination and detection.

There are both point and nonpoint sources of groundwater contamination. Nonpoint sources have three distinguishing characteristics: (1) they are generated by diffuse land use activities, (2) they are not conveyed to groundwater through deliberately controlled discharge, and (3) they are not susceptible to "end of pipe" treatment. Agriculture is increasingly recognized as a prominent nonpoint source, mainly associated with the significant increase in the use of agricultural chemicals (pesticides and fertilizers)

over the past 25 years. Several studies have confirmed a direct link between the use of nitrogen fertilizers and nitrate contamination in groundwater, and linkages from other agricultural chemicals are considered likely.

This issue is related to agriculture in two ways: (1) farming as a source of groundwater pollution, and (2) farm families, along with many other people, as consumers of groundwater. Much is yet to be learned about the interrelationships between cultural practices in crop farming and the release of contaminants into groundwater. Yet, it is a virtual certainty that some restrictions or limitations on various cultural practices in crop production under certain environmental conditions will be essential to assuring groundwater quality, just as restrictions are already occurring regarding point sources such as waste disposal. These will influence who farms as well as how, and many farmers understandably view potential restrictions as infringement on their "right to farm".

Farm families are heavily dependent upon groundwater for consumption purposes, and share the same types of health-related concerns as do other groundwater users. Yet, farmers do not want to be branded as "public enemies" regarding groundwater contamination, and view toxic waste dumps and other potential and known point and nonpoint sources with even greater concern--concern growing out of their dual roles as both consumers and potential contributors of contaminants who might be falsely blamed for health problems.

The policy alternatives for dealing with agriculture and groundwater quality are early in the evolutionary stages. Yet, this agricultural policy specialist has witnessed no other public policy issue that has generated as much interest in both the agricultural sector and among rural people in general.

5. Family Farms

The structure of farming is an emotional issue, and thus one that has political overtones and policy implications. However, it is a rather ill-defined issue, mainly because the concept of a "family farm" means much different things to different people. Some view the family farm more or less in terms of the Jeffersonian ideal, that is, a farmer, inseparable from his family, who owns the farm, provides most if not all of the labor and management, and essentially works full time at farming. Others take more extreme views. Some equate family farms with subsistence agriculture; some hold that a family farm is any farm operation that is managed predominately by a group of people who are related; others suggest that it is a farm business in which the operator and possibly some members of her/his extended family provide most of the management and some of the capital and labor.

Regardless of definition, there is a general perception in the agricultural community that the family farm is worth preserving and that government policies that cause its demise should be avoided. Operationalizing this concept, however, is exceptionally difficult because of the wide range in what people believe should be preserved. There simply is no single, generally accepted definition even though there is broad acceptance that the concept is

a "good" for society, i. e. there is something inherently good about the family farm.

More than anything else, people tend to consider the family farm to be size-related, that is, many people consider "big" farms not to be family farms. However, there are many very large farms (annual sales exceeding $1 million) that are owned and operated by a single or extended family, people who consider themselves to be family farmers as much as anyone. By like token, some people do not consider "small" farms (annual sales less than $20,000) to be family farms because most of the family's time is spent working at off-farm jobs and the farm is little more than a combination of avocation and residence.

Farm production is concentrated among a relatively small number of farms. The U.S. Department of Agriculture puts the total number of farms at about 2.2 million. However, the largest 337,000 of these (those with annual sales exceeding $100,000) account for nearly three-fourths of the total. On average, these farms generate sufficient net farm incomes to support one or more families. The remaining 1.9 million places called farms, with 25 percent of all farm output, on average generate negative net farm earnings. Yet, the operators of these places tend to remain on the farm. Thus, it is more than economics that sustains the majority of farms.

It is not clear that, when people call for policies that will preserve the family farm, such policies should be based in economic measures. Both the concept and the reality of the family farm are probably more as a social than an economic institution. Still, economic-related policies are those that typically get discussed in the family farm framework, such as limiting farm program payments to small and modest sized farms, outlawing corporate ownership of farm land, credit assistance for limited resource farmers, etc. The bottom line is, feelings often run strong in the agricultural sector in support for the concept of the family farm. But translating such emotion into effective public policy is complicated by (1) lack of consensus on what constitutes a family farm, and (2) the intermixing of economics-oriented policies with noneconomic goals.

6. New Products/New Product Uses

During the 1960s there was considerable interest in the U.S. in developing new agricultural products and new uses for existing agricultural products. Such developments were viewed as means for expanding production and marketing opportunities for farmers and thus enhancing their income prospects. With the rapid acceleration in export demand for basic agricultural commodities that occurred between 1973 and 1981, much of the interest in new products/new uses waned. Public attention diminished in light of the improvements to farm income and asset values that resulted from the unprecedented growth in exports, while private industry attention was stemmed in part by the increases in price levels and price volatility for basic commodities associated with the expanded relative importance of (mercurial) export markets. Higher prices and greater price uncertainty decreased the attractiveness of these basic commodities as inputs into the manufacture of industrial products and new food products.

With the downturn in commodity export sales since 1982, however, both public and private interest in new agricultural products and product uses has been rekindled. Again, from the public interest perspective, these are seen as ways of strengthening the agricultural economy while reducing the dependency of the sector on government programs and payments. In the private sector, relatively large surpluses and low prices for basic commodities such as corn and the availability of idle land upon which new crops could be grown increase the attractiveness of such crops as feedstocks for the production of existing and new products. Efforts to develop a corn-based ethanol energy industry and to commercialize oilseeds such as cuphea for oleochemical applications in place of petrochemicals stand as current examples.

Interest in new products/new uses was evident in language included in the 1985 farm bill (Food Security Act of 1985). For example, section 1428 directs the Secretary of Agriculture to "...develop and implement a research and pilot project program for the development of supplemental and alternative crops..." and section 1436 directs the Department of Agriculture to "...conduct a research and development program to formulate new uses for farm and forest products." Several commodity organizations, such as the National Corn Growers Association and the American Soybean Association, have made the development of new product uses a high priority. In its June 27, 1987 report, the USDA's New Farm and Forest Products Task Force put forth this as a national goal: "To develop and commercialize within 25 years, an array of new farm and forest products, utilizing at least 150 million acres of productive capacity, to meet market needs representing net new demand for agricultural and forestry production."

One particularly innovative proposal would tie together new market development with international trade policy, in the form of a bilateral trade agreement with Brazil. Much interest currently exists in the U.S. in increasing the use of ethanol in motor fuels (i. e. gasohol), primarily as a octane enhancer and for its beneficial impacts in reducing certain noxious emissions. However, sufficient domestic ethanol production capacity does not now exist to accommodate widespread adoption, and domestic production costs appear to be high enough to discourage significant investment even in light of current federal and state tax incentives for ethanol-blended motor fuels. By contrast, the Brazilians have a well-developed ethanol technology and industry, based on sugar cane as the primary feedstock, that appears to be a potential cost competitive source of ethanol in U.S. markets. Imports have been restricted, however, to protect the domestic corn-based ethanol industry.

Available evidence suggests that the U.S. has a clear competitive advantage relative to Brazil in the production of corn, and that Brazilian demand for corn for livestock feed is expanding measurably. Thus, the potential may exist to develop a bilateral trade agreement with Brazil, trading U.S. corn for Brazilian ethanol, that would be beneficial to both the agricultural sectors and the general economies of both countries. This is just one example of the type of innovative thinking that deserves consideration in this whole area of market expansion for American agriculture; numerous other possibilities undoubtedly exist.

Policy issues relative to this topic are not yet well defined. There clearly is considerable support for new initiatives, and there is a role for supportive public policies. Whether those should take the form of tax incentives, risk sharing, earmarked research funding, CCC commodity set-asides for experimental uses, extensions of patent protection such as to new genetically-engineered life forms, or something else is not clear. It is an area, however, where well conceived and soundly conceptualized policy initiatives should attract support while generating relatively little opposition within the agricultural community.